

# Old Town Triangle District



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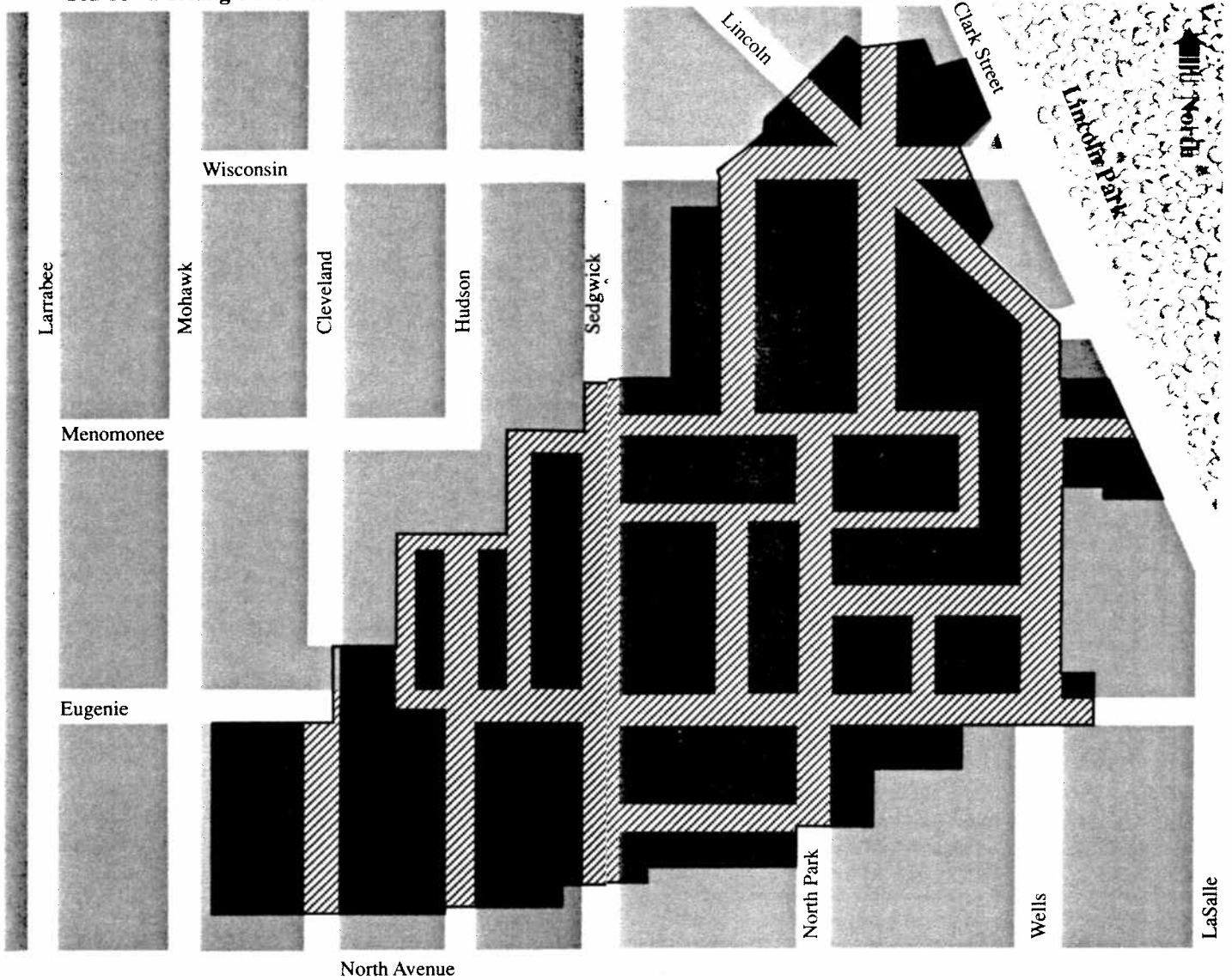
**COMMISSION ON CHICAGO LANDMARKS**

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*The Commission maintains research files on individual landmarks and landmark districts, which are available to the public. The staff also provides technical assistance to building owners and architects.*

## Old Town Triangle District



### Early Development

In the mid-1800s, Chicago's population was increased by a large immigration from the southern German states. Many were Roman Catholics seeking an opportunity to practice their religion and retain their individual customs without the interference they had experienced in Germany. The earliest German-speaking immigrants in Chicago were mainly farmers and semi-skilled workers. They settled on the Near North Side around Chicago Avenue and west of Clark Street near the factories on the Chicago River. At Chicago and Wabash avenues, these industrious Germans quickly built a church, St. Joseph's, which was consecrated in 1846.

During the next five years, many of the farmers in St. Joseph's parish moved north beyond the city limits, to the meadows above North Avenue and west of the swamp which was later drained and transformed into Lincoln Park. There they grew celery, potatoes, and cabbage and kept cows and chickens. Michael Diversey, part owner of the Diversey and Lill brewery at Chicago and Michigan avenues and a prominent member of St. Joseph's parish, owned a

great deal of this farmland. In 1851, this area was annexed by the city of Chicago. William B. Ogden, the first mayor of Chicago, bought property here in 1856. Among other prominent owners of land in the area were William Rand and Andrew McNally, map publishers.

The population grew quickly and the area acquired the name North Town. (Use of the term Old Town did not begin until after World War II.) Small shopkeepers from St. Joseph's parish moved north to provide goods for North Town's residents. The parish was expanding northward due to a new wave of German immigrants. These newcomers were businessmen, journalists, and educators who formed here a solid middle-class sector of the German community. They had left Germany after their unsuccessful attempts to gain power for the middle classes during the aborted 1848 revolution against the nobility. Thus they were called "Forty-eighters." Many Forty-eighters settled to the east of Clark Street, enlarging the population of St. Joseph's parish and causing this northward expansion.

Until 1852, the Germans who moved to North Town continued to travel back to St. Joseph's on Sundays. But as the population increased, the Catholics in the vicinity of North Avenue and Larrabee Street petitioned for a new parish nearer their homes. In July of 1852, the Reverend Anthony Kopp, pastor of St. Joseph's, presided over a meeting of prospective parishioners. During the meeting, Michael Diversey offered to deed a plot of ground at North and Hudson avenues for a new church. In four months a frame church, forty by sixty feet, was built at a cost of \$730 and was dedicated to Saint Michael, in honor of Diversey. A single bell in the small cupola called the parishioners to worship. In 1854, a school was built on the plot of land north of the church. Soon the modest church and parochial school became integral parts of the community.

The members of St. Michael's Church were from forty-nine different German states. Their customs and temperaments were as varied as their dialects, creating on a smaller scale the nationalism that prevailed in the German homeland. The dissension among the peoples of North Town inhibited the development of a sense of solidarity until Reverend John Mueller, a Redemptorist Father, took charge of St. Michael's Church in 1860. He encouraged the development of community spirit, using the church as a unifying institution. Loyalty to St. Michael's overcame the clannishness of earlier years, and the Redemptorist Fathers channeled the energies of the parish into building much-needed community facilities.

As the community developed, the population became more varied. The Scotch-Irish-oriented Presbyterian Seminary of the Northwest at Fullerton Avenue drew Irish truck farmers to the area around Clark Street. Here too settled Italians from Lombardy, one of the north Italian states. Several settlers of French origin purchased land west of the Italians, closer to the Germans around St. Michael's. The church was enlarged to accommodate the increasing population, and a two-story frame school and a home for the priests were built in 1861. In the same year, the Sisters of Notre Dame were invited to come from Milwaukee and teach the young girls of the parish. A convent was built for the nuns. In 1866, a separate school building for girls was erected. The cornerstone for a new, larger church was laid that same year at the corner of Eugenie Street and Cleveland Avenue diagonally across the block from the old church. This new church, the predecessor to the existing structure, was completed in 1869. A year later, a new rectory for the priests was built to the south of the church, facing Cleveland Avenue. St. Michael's was firmly established as the central institution of the area before the Chicago Fire of 1871 destroyed most of the city.

#### *Early Buildings*

St. Michael's Church was built of locally produced red brick. The parishioners would have preferred to use stone, but at that time the working-class people of the parish could not afford it. Still, the church was of grand proportions. The parishioners watched proudly while Mr. Walbaum, the builder, used a steam engine to hoist the bricks and mortar for the 200-foot tower that rose at the east end of the church front. This gable-roofed entrance facade

contained three doors with elaborate windows above. Limestone trim accented the windows and the niches between them, and simplified versions of the same motifs were used on the other walls of the church. The construction of this second St. Michael's cost \$130,000.

The parishioners who attended St. Michael's were either truck farmers or semi-skilled laborers who made shoes, cut cloth, brewed beer, joined wood, loaded grain elevators on the Chicago River, or laid rails for the Chicago and Rock Island lines. They lived in Chicago cottages, a particular kind of building suitable to the rapid development of the city. These cottages were built by a method that is known as balloon framing but was then called simply "Chicago construction." Balloon framing was a new method of construction that used pre-cut boards (2x4s) and machine manufactured nails. Both materials resulted in the industrialization of home building, for boards and nails could be produced abundantly and cheaply. Frames could be prefabricated and houses could be produced at reasonable cost in virtually no time. As the population of the city increased, these cottages were built side by side on narrow lots.

The cottages were small, often no more than twenty by thirty feet, and one or one-and-a-half stories high. The earliest cottages were built on log footings but later ones were put on high, common-brick foundations that formed raised basements. Often the basements were used for storage of coal and vegetables for winter. The rectangular balloon frame was sheathed in pine clapboards and topped with a pitched roof with gables facing front and rear. A broad flight of steps led to the entrance which was usually placed to one side of a pair of windows. Above, in the gable, was a window lighting the attic story. The ornament, true in form to the then-popular Greek revival style, was modest, accentuating with simple motifs the door and window openings and the pediment created by the gable. These cottages were well suited to the simple needs of Chicago's growing population.

**These two cottages at 220 and 222 W. Willow Street are typical of the type that used to house the working class people of North Town.**  
(Barbara Crane, photographer)



### *The Fire*

The Chicago Fire began on the evening of October 8, 1871, and swept north, destroying nearly everything in its path. North Town's frame houses quickly burned to the ground. The inhabitants gathered in the streets around St. Michael's and watched their new school, rectory, and convent crumble. Flames engulfed the new church and the

The carefully carved wooden trim on many of the buildings within the Old Town Triangle District reflects the European tradition of skilled craftsmanship brought to Chicago by early immigrants. Spindle railings, curved bracket supports, and unusual window trim add charm to the older frame buildings.

(Barbara Crane, photographer)



building was gutted. When the parishioners returned after the fire had died down, only the double brick walls on the south, east, and west ends of the church remained. Even the new church bells lay melted on the ground. The disaster did not dampen the community spirit among the parishioners for they gathered and began to clean up the debris immediately. They shoveled ashes into the cellar space beneath the church and set to work building a temporary place of worship: a lean-to propped against an old garden wall. Within a month, a more substantial frame structure facing Cleveland Avenue was completed for use as a church and schoolhouse until St. Michael's could be repaired. One year and three days after the fire, St. Michael's was restored to its original form.

St. Michael's Church has been redecorated repeatedly. These embellishments and alterations reveal the German heritage of the parish. In 1881, the interior was decorated by Karl Lambrecht, an artist from New York. The interior has been repainted at least four times, but the current color scheme of off-white, light blue, and gold is reminiscent of Bavarian Baroque church interiors, popular throughout Austria and parts of Germany. The panels of the ceiling are painted with gilded interlacing designs. Gilt accents the ribs of the vaulting and the supporting compound columns.

In 1902, the church acquired five altars. The Romanesque style high altar, fifty-six feet tall, contains a representation of St. Michael in his conquest over the fallen angels. The altar to Our Lady of Perpetual Help contains the picture of Our Lady which is said to have miraculously survived the 1871 fire. The parishioners are particularly fond of this altar. There are two large oil paintings by Hans Schmitz covering the walls on either side of the sanctuary. The extraordinarily tall stained-glass windows of the church were brought from the Mayer Window Art Institute of Munich in 1902. Later, St. Michael's acquired fourteen carved wooden stations of the cross designed by a Swiss artist named Schmalz; they are colorfully painted and typically German.

The exterior was redone in the late 1880s by Chicago architect Herman J. Gaul, who at that time also added the steeple to the tower. In 1913, the eight-foot-tall stone statue of St. Michael was acquired from Bavaria and set in the central niche of the entrance facade.

### *Post-Fire History*

During the late 1800s, the area around St. Michael's remained populated by working-class families. Many residents worked north of Fullerton in what was then the town of Lake View (annexed by the city in 1889). Several large manufacturing plants were located there: the Deering Harvester Works, the North Chicago Malleable Iron Works, and the Northwestern Terra Cotta Works. Many other residents worked in the factories along the Chicago River. Some brewed Meister Brau at the Peter Hand Brewery on North Avenue and others worked in the large dress-trimming factory that was located on North Park Avenue.

These people had quickly rebuilt their homes after the fire. The first to be rebuilt were balloon frames but a city fire ordinance outlawed wooden buildings after 1874. Some of the frame cottages can still be found in the area. As the



**This photograph, taken shortly after the Chicago Fire of 1871, shows the ruins of St. Michael's Church. The double walls on the south, east, and west ends of the church withstood the fire. Within one year and three days after the fire, the industrious parishioners of St. Michael's Church rebuilt the damaged structure. Chicago cottages like the one pictured in the center of the photograph dotted the area within days after the fire and were sometimes referred to as "relief shanties."**

(Courtesy of Chicago Historical Society)

owners grew more prosperous, they often moved the original frame homes to the rear of their lots and in their place built brick cottages of more substantial quality.

In the early 1870s, the land between the lake and the eastern part of the North Town area became Lincoln Park. Previously it had been used as a cemetery. With the removal of the graves and the establishment of an attractive recreation area, the Near North Side became a more desirable place to live. Two reminders of the early use of this land still exist: the Couch Tomb just north of the Chicago Historical Society and the David Kennison memorial across

from Wisconsin at Clark Street. The well-planned walking paths and waterways of the park drew new residents to the area. Their homes gradually replaced the truck farms. The new residences reflected the prosperity of their owners, many of whom were leaders in the German community. The vegetable gardens gave way to lawns, fruit trees, and flower gardens.

As early as 1872, large mansions and brick- and stone-faced townhouses began to line LaSalle Street reaching toward North Town. In the late 1870s and 1880s, developers began to build multiple-family row houses in the eastern





**These Queen Anne style row houses located at 164-172 Eugenie Street are typical of the sort built near Lincoln Park in the late 1800s. The interesting rooflines, the asymmetrical window arrangement, and the variety of building materials make these houses some of the most elaborate in the Old Town Triangle District. (Barbara Crane, photographer)**

portion of North Town. Many of these houses still exist and are typical of the urban housing that characterized American cities at this time: flat- or bay-fronted, tall and narrow in proportion, and usually two or three stories tall. As in the Chicago cottages, a broad stairway leads to the first-floor entrance. Bays, when used, rise the height of the building. Sandstone lintels, sometimes decorated with incised patterns, top the windows, and stringcourses of sandstone divide the stories. The contrast of this material with the surface of the wall creates variety and texture in the facades. Ornate cornices detailed with dentils and supported by brackets almost invariably top the buildings.

The building forms of the 1870s and 1880s did not vary much, but stylistic differences add variety to these row houses. The two most popular architectural styles were the Italianate and the Queen Anne styles. The Italianate style is marked by exaggeratedly tall, narrow proportioning. The wall planes are, in general, simply-treated flat surfaces. The lintels of the window and door openings are often arched and are frequently quite ornate. Cornices supported by brackets are common.

The Queen Anne style relies on the interplay of color and texture, and the use of bands of contrasting building materials is typical. Decorative terra-cotta moldings and tiles with small, classically-derived patterns are integral elements of the style. The facades of Queen Anne buildings tend to be asymmetrical and the roof lines picturesque, displaying gables and dormers.

Some of the early well-to-do residents of North Town built their homes in a meadow on what is today North Lincoln Park West. Here, in 1874, Frederick Wacker built his home at what is now 1838 North Lincoln Park West. Wacker was a Forty-eighter. He earned his living as a brewer; before establishing his own brewery, he worked with Michael Diversey. Wacker was a founding member of organizations such as the Sharpshooter's Association and the German Singing Society and was highly regarded as a leader in the German community.

The unusual house that Frederick Wacker built has a fairy tale quality about it. It has all the characteristics of a Swiss chalet: a wide over-hanging veranda supported by curved brackets, openwork hoods above the windows, and carved wooden spindle railings flanking the broad stairway. Although other houses in the area utilize interesting carved wooden trim, none approaches the picturesque quality of the Wacker house. While the Wacker home was being built, the family lived over the carriage house at the back of the property. This house was later brought to the front of the property at 1836 North Lincoln Park West and remodeled by Wacker's son Charles. Charles was one of the directors of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition and later was chairman of the Chicago Plan Commission for seventeen years.

North Lincoln Park West is lined with other interesting buildings. One of the earliest is the apartment building to the north of the Wacker homes built by a brick manufacturer, Nathan Eisendrath, in 1873. Its formal character is derived from the French style window heads and plain treatment of the brick facade. To the south of the Wacker

**The Wacker homes, standing side by side on North Lincoln Park West, are particularly quaint. The "gingerbread" trim on the larger house is an exceptional example of the fine craftsmanship found in the construction of many of the homes in the district. (Barbara Crane, photographer)**





The five houses at 1826-34 North Lincoln Park West were designed by Louis Sullivan.  
(Barbara Crane, photographer)

homes are five brick row houses designed by Louis Sullivan and built in 1885. These simplified Queen Anne houses are highlighted with typical Sullivanesque terra-cotta ornament. Farther down the street on the northwest corner of Menomonee and Lincoln Park West stands a simple frame farmhouse built in 1874. The "Angel Door" house across the street at 1817 North Lincoln Park West, built by a French architect, is adorned with two unusual wooden doors depicting angels. They were carved by the first owner's son, Max Tonk. The diversity of these early buildings makes the block particularly charming. Between 1876 and 1879, John B. Mallers and Benjamin V. Page developed their properties in the 1800 block of Lincoln Avenue. The row houses for Mallers's property were designed by the architect John J. Flanders.

This house at 1802 North Lincoln Park West was built in 1874.  
(Barbara Crane, photographer)



The 1880s saw continued development in the eastern area of North Town. Most of the homes on Orleans were built in that decade. In 1885, the largest single developer in the area, Daniel F. Crilly, began his residential project. Crilly, a South Side contractor, purchased the parcel of land from Wells Street to North Park Avenue between Eugenie and St. Paul streets from Florimond Canda, one of the French settlers in the area. (St. Paul Street was originally named Florimond Street after Canda.) Crilly put a street through the middle of the block from St. Paul to Eugenie and in 1885 developed this new street which he named Crilly Court. On one side of the street are apartments and on the other are row houses. Above the doors of the apartment buildings are carved the names of Crilly's children: Isabelle, Oliver, Erminie, and Edgar. Crilly developed the 1700 block of North Park Avenue in the years between 1888 and 1893. In 1893, the apartment buildings



A view of the west side of Crilly Court. These simplified Queen Anne style row houses were constructed in 1885 as part of Daniel Crilly's project to develop the entire 1600 block between North Park Avenue and Wells Street. The unique character of the block has been retained and today the Crilly buildings are a particularly popular place to live.  
(Barbara Crane, photographer)

with store fronts on Wells Street were completed. Several interesting people are said to have lived in Crilly's block. Eugene Field, journalist and poet, was one, and George K. Spoor, an early movie producer known for his Keystone Cops, was another.

The new residences in the area were interspersed with coach houses belonging to wealthy homeowners who lived south of Lincoln Park in an area called the Gold Coast. North Town's proximity to the Gold Coast made it an ideal location for the coach houses which often contained second-floor space for lodging. Many of the coach houses still exist today and have been converted into family residences.





Gardens such as this one at 1802 North Lincoln Park West are proudly displayed during the annual Old Town Art Fair. (Barbara Crane, photographer)

#### *A Town Within A City*

The German cultural heritage of the community bound together the residents of the newly developed areas and the older settlers around St. Michael's. Many of the new middle-class residents, who were predominantly Protestant, attended St. James German Evangelical Church at 1718 North Park Avenue. German was spoken in both churches well into the twentieth century, effectively maintaining the ethnicity of the community. Strongly supported secular institutions also helped maintain the German culture. The Lincoln Park Cycling Club, which stood where the Lincoln Hotel now stands, and the Germania Club at Clark Street and Germania Place were popular gathering places for various German societies. Zahner's Tavern, which was located at the southwest corner of Wells and Eugenie streets, provided food and drink for its regular clientele. North Avenue was lined with German shops: Moll's Meat Market, the Wieland Cafe, and Kuhn's Delicatessen, which is now located farther north on Lincoln Avenue. Piper's Bakery at 1610 Wells Street was another German favorite. Sports were also an integral part of the local social life. A focal point of the community was the *Turn Gemeinde*, a gymnastic hall on Wells Street. In 1898, a swimming facility, Fritz Meyers' Natatorium, was opened nearby. The Menomonee Club at Willow Street and North Park Avenue was a bowling alley for the local enthusiasts. All these facilities, along with the German language newspapers that circulated throughout the area, helped maintain the German culture in North Town.

#### *Old Town Today*

In the early 1900s, North Town stopped growing. An elderly man interviewed in 1928 said that the area had not visibly changed since he had bought his hat store on North Avenue in 1896. But the neighborhoods to the south and west of the area changed as a result of the construction of the elevated railroad in 1900. It dissected the neighborhoods through which it passed, and these areas witnessed a decline. The Swedes to the south of North Town moved out, and the area eventually became a predominantly low-income Black community. Many of the Germans around St. Michael's moved farther north to St. Alphonsus' parish on North Lincoln Avenue.

The streets to the west of North Town became populated with new waves of immigrants: Poles, Slovaks, Serbians, Roumanians, Hungarians, and Italians. Small apartment buildings were converted to rooming houses and thus accommodated the influx of this heterogeneous population, and the area became densely populated. Light manufacturing downgraded the character of Halsted Street, once lined with neighborhood shops. The deterioration of the neighborhoods west of North Town had its inevitable effect on North Town. Housing in the area was not as carefully maintained as before. Asphalt siding and other inappropriate materials were sometimes applied to the exterior walls in an effort to "modernize" the older buildings.

The eastern portion of North Town, however, retained much of its original character. In the twenties and thirties this area almost completely escaped the growing trend of replacing older structures with new apartments and apartment hotels. The visual scale of the area was maintained, and only the spire of St. Michael's rose above the rooflines of North Town. The character and charm of the neighborhood was assured by the renewal of community spirit in the 1930s. Edgar Crilly, son of the original developer, rejuvenated his buildings in the area and his efforts inspired others. After World War II, the name Old Town came into use and the Old Town Triangle Association, which has done much to promote community spirit, was formed in 1948. The organization provides a base for social activities which have built a spirit of neighborhood cooperation. Members of the organization (anyone in the Old Town area may join) believe that the neighborhood can be bettered through cooperation. The organization has served as a liaison between the community and city agencies. It has also encouraged the maintenance of property standards and has organized tree plantings in an effort to beautify the neighborhood. The current charm of Old Town owes much to this active group.

Old Town today is a spirited community. It is proud of its history and of the past and present accomplishments of Old Towners. During the heyday of radio in the late 1930s and early 1940s, when such unforgettable shows as "Ma Perkins" were produced in Chicago, many of the men and women responsible for these productions lived in Old Town. The neighborhood was convenient to the broadcasting studios in the Wrigley Building and the Merchandise Mart. The building at 1852-56 North Lincoln Avenue, then called "Whiskey Point," was a popular residence for radio people such as Art Jacobsen, John Larkin, Genelle Gibbs, Dolph Nelson, and Sarajane Wells. These radio personalities

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